

THE QUIET

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For anyone who's ever been alone in that dark
place.

The garage door rose slowly as James Benton rushed to his car on the morning after the first darkness had passed. Once in the car and backing out, he lit a cigarette. He took note that it was one of those rare days when none of his neighbors appeared to be leaving at the same time. He flipped his ashes outside the window as he pulled out of the cul de sac. Then he leaned over and turned on the radio. The speakers crackled out white noise. He changed the station and found that anywhere he moved the dial, nothing came through but static. He shut off the radio and muttered to himself, wondering what would go wrong next with the old junker.

When he got to the main road at the entrance of the housing complex, he stared in shock at the empty road for a moment. He peeled out, thinking it was one of those lucky times when he might be able to gun it the whole way and barely make it. He crossed

under 465 and took the next right as he always did. This road was always empty. But as he pulled up to the light at State Road 31 with its large grocery store, many restaurants, and other businesses, he started to wonder what was going on. Had he forgotten a holiday? He looked at the calendar on his phone as he stopped. September 26th. He looked back up at the road ahead of him. To his right the exit would take him over the bridge he'd just crossed underneath. Even on Christmas Day, some traffic had existed. He didn't have time for curiosity and he needed to get to work, so he zoomed out onto the empty road.

He took the 465 West exit, looking out for oncoming cars. There were none. After a moment he saw a car up the hill. "There," he told himself, "there's nothing weird going on, you're just fucking crazy." He tried the radio again as he came closer to the car much faster than he expected. The radio crackled static as he reached the car. He understood immediately. The car sat still in the far left lane of the three lane highway with no one in it. He looked in his rearview then. Still not a single car coming. He couldn't see any up ahead, either. His chest tightened. He thought about turning back and going home or maybe running off to his brother Joel's on the east side of town. Joel. He pulled out his cell phone again and quickly scrolled to his brother's name in the contact list and hit send. As the fourth ring sounded, he saw something moving up ahead, beyond the bridge for Mann Road. Smoke rose, way off in the distance. It

became clearer as he came around the curve of the highway. Thick, black smoke fought its way up into the atmosphere from something on the ground. Joel's voicemail answered and James closed his phone.

The smoke came from the bright orange fire engulfing the 70 West exit. It must have originally been several cars, but now just looked like a burning pile of twisted metal. The flames rolled in great waves from within the pile-up. James found himself veering over to the left, as far away from the flames as he could. He let off the gas as he tried dialing 911. The phone rang and rang as he came alongside the burning metal sculpture. When he'd passed the scene, he found himself watching the fire roll up into smoke toward the sky in his rearview. The sight mesmerized him. The fire far behind him, he realized the phone was still ringing, so he closed it. He saw more and more deserted cars as he came closer to his exit. Some just sat in the middle of the road, some had veered off, and some had piled into each other. Half of the latter were on fire. He slowed down to exit, but instead passed the Sam Jones Expressway. He was pretty sure the upside-down Crown Victoria would be impossible to get around.

He continued down the road, wondering what to do. His eyes refocused from staring at a semi jack-knifed into the East Washington Street exit with a Ford Explorer wedged underneath its trailer. Along all the exits and medians of different roads, he hadn't seen

a single blade of grass. Where the grass should have been, lay rich, brown soil. He shrugged it aside as simple landscaping at first, but now that he came to the sixth or seventh exit, he knew it had to be something else. He stopped the car and got out. After turning off the engine, he noticed the piercing silence. As he stepped out, the air tasted stale. He leaned on the concrete railing of the bridge that stood over Washington Street for a long time. Other than the distant sounds of factories, he heard nothing. No cars, airplanes, people. Not even birds. He looked down at the road below him, leaning over the concrete slab to see under the bridge. At the edge of the road lay the only thing to be seen shy of road, dirt, and concrete. A single battered doll with one large, black eye, one empty gash where the other eye should be, and curly, red hair lay in the earth, looking up at him. A cool wind fluttered over and he shivered.

He got back in the car and sped on to the next exit, 10th street, finding it void of any wreckage. Going up the ramp, he saw nothing different from anywhere else. He could see a few cars abandoned randomly off in the distance. Everywhere grass should be, bare land replaced it. And then he saw the tree. James slammed on the brakes, his tires screeching against the pavement. The tree stood lonely, towering over a grassless landscape. The roots showed visibly where they entered the ground. It was an unnatural sight, making the tree appear naked in some way. James put the car back into drive and went over the median,

making a u-turn toward the exit for 465 going the other way. Once he rolled back onto the highway, he began to speed. He had a few things he needed to check before he ventured east to Joel's house.

This time, as he pulled back into the housing edition he'd lived in for the past seven years, James took notice of the lifeless quiet that had escaped his notice earlier that morning. It seemed as if the life had been sucked from the place, figuratively and literally. Not a sound or glimpse of movement caught his attention as he crept down the road. His head hung out the window, listening and looking around for some sign of something, anything alive. Then it clicked. He couldn't remember seeing or hearing anything alive. Except the tree. The tree looked just as alive and healthy as him. But only one.

He looked through the bare, dirt yards for another tree. He passed his own road continuing the search, until after an hour or so he'd combed the entire complex with nothing to show for it. When he got back home, he drug himself out of his car, feeling bleak and confused. He went straight into the kitchen and turned on the water. Then he wet his hands, splashed the water over his face, and ran it through his hair. He tried to clear his mind.

Stretching his back, his eyes closed and his head back, he let a drop of water touch his tongue. It tasted stale. No, it tasted beyond stale. He knelt down and took a gulp straight from the source. It tasted purer than any bottled water he'd ever drank.

Usually, his water tasted so vile you could barely drink it. It had an odor so strong, he found himself taking shorter and shorter showers over the years. He leaned down in front of the powered stream and took a long sniff. No scent at all. A thought occurred to him, striking him dumb.

Leaving the water on, he ran up the stairs to the loft. As soon as he was on the second floor, he found himself leaning over the banister, completely out of breath. When his lungs didn't feel full of razor blades, he walked underneath the entrance to the attic. Gripping the chord that hung from the door, he pulled it, bringing the door down and revealing the enclosed ladder. He experimented with putting his weight on the decrepit ladder. It seemed to still hold him. He went up, reaching blindly for the string hanging from the overhead light bulb. When he felt it, he tugged, lighting up the messy attic. The light cast an eerie, yellowish hue on the room.

He knew exactly where to look for the old microscope. He hadn't used it since college, but he used it enough then to make up for the many years since. He took a deep breath and blew the top layer of dust from the top of the box. The word Olympus appeared in bright orange letters. The sight made James smile with nostalgia.

He was back in his kitchen 20 minutes later with the dusty old microscope set up on the counter. He cleaned off its lenses and several slides. Then he turned the water down until it merely dripped. Putting

the first slide under, he collected one good drop then carefully put it in the microscope. Pulling a small bottle from his pocket, he took a second slide. Opening the bottle, he let a drop of the murky liquid inside drop onto the slide. He set that one next to the other. On the third, he lightly spit and slid it into place with the other two.

He focused in on the first slide. It was more transparent than the glass itself. He couldn't see a single living organism. Next, he looked at the murky water, gathered from the neighborhood pond behind the housing edition. Aside from murky clouds of soil, he saw no evidence of anything that was, or had ever been, alive.

The third one interested him the most. He expected to see what the other two lacked, but found nothing more than thick, slimy liquid along with traces of mucus and remnants of food. James didn't remember much from microbiology, but one thing he did remember: the human mouth flourishes with life. But the slide with his saliva contained nothing alive at all.

Nothing seemed different as James drove along the highway, avoiding the empty cars and collisions. The noise of the engine relieved him in place of the dreadful silence he'd endured at home for several days now. But even still, an oppressive fear hung over him as he made his way toward his brother's house. Not a single person, alive or dead, appeared at any point. Who was he kidding? He'd seen no signs of life save for a tree and his own reflection. Checking the Internet only added to the number of questions swirling in his head. About half of the pages he attempted to load brought up nothing, and those that did come up hadn't been updated since before everyone disappeared.

Even the roar of the car's engine wasn't distracting enough from the desolation that surrounded him. At first he was only nervous. He told himself whatever happened was probably localized to the south side of

town. But as he made his way around the circular highway northeastward, his nerves frayed toward panic. The pileup along the 65 South exit had really jarred him. He'd never seen so much carnage. Hundreds of cars smashed together, more than half of them on fire and smoking profusely. The heat through the closed window came through in waves, even from the far side of the highway. The horizon above blurred in and out of focus from the flames. But still he saw no bodies. Not a single one.

The city streets weren't much different on the east side of town. Those not desolate contained wayward cars and the remains of several explosions. One major thing was different here, though. House fires, a lot of them, littered the area. From what James could tell, it looked like some of them had spread from one house to another. It was everything he could do to keep from breaking down as he watched the smoke roll up from those houses. For 20 terrifying minutes, he imagined finding his brother's house burned to the ground, Joel's body the first one for James to find. But relief came when he turned down Hopkins Road and the entire street looked completely unscathed save for the lack of anything green or growing. Joel's red Corsica sat in the driveway as James pulled up to the curb. He killed the engine and sat there for a long moment, studying the house. The shades were drawn and the door was closed. Looking around, he didn't see a single house with an empty driveway or any other signs of normal activity. It appeared just like his neighborhood. Just as deathly still. After a

few deep breaths and a long, hard swallow, James pulled the keys from the ignition and got out of the car. He walked with short strides through the dirt yard, taking his time and examining the soil with his shoes.

With the front step of the porch just a stride away, he stopped still and gazed into the front window. He could make out the outline of the dining room table and various ceramic decorations Cheryl, his sister-in-law, had put up. He kicked the dirt off his shoes and started up the porch, toward the door. Holding his keychain up in front of his face, he stared at it, unable to find the key. He knew it was there, but he just couldn't find it. Then he snapped himself out of it, pulled aside the proper key, and used it to unlock the door. The door creaked and moaned as he opened it. Sebastian, the family's golden retriever, who usually attacked James by throwing his front paws onto James's chest and smothering him in doggy kisses, was nowhere to be seen. James called out as he stepped around the dark blue recliner.

"Joel? Cheryl? Sebastian? Here boy?"

He headed for the table he'd seen in the window. Looking to the right into the kitchen, he saw no one there. On the floor he found Sebastian's food and water bowls, both partially empty. He'd started for the bedroom when he heard a low pitched boom from outside of the house. It went on for a moment until finally it rattled the walls and all of the nick-knacks for several seconds and then faded away. Even though

James knew the sound had probably been a distant explosion, it still made him jump when he heard it. He entered the hallway. On the right side, the guest room door stood ajar, while on the left, Joel and Cheryl's bedroom door remained closed. Straight ahead, James saw the wide open bathroom door.

James tried the guest room first looking for any sign of Sebastian. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was stalling, but it helped him deal with his fear, so he went along with it. Under the guest bed, he saw a sparkle of shiny metal. He tapped the object with his foot so that it rolled out from under the bed. It was a collar that said, "Sebastian" on it. He told himself it could've just been an old collar. After confirming the guest room was empty, he went to the bathroom, flipped on the light, and looked in the mirror. He turned on the water and ran it over his hands. Then he ran his hands over his face and through his hair and took a deep breath. He dreaded what he would find in that room and didn't want to look anymore. If they were gone, he wondered if he could convince himself they were merely somewhere else. Worse yet, what if they were in there, frozen stiff. The different possibilities terrorized him. He couldn't take it anymore. With tears streaming down his face, he burst through the bathroom, and flung the bedroom door open. Joel's glasses and two cell phones sat on the nightstand, one of them flashing. James walked over to them and picked up the flashing one. Joel's. He flipped through the menu

until he found the recent calls list. His own number and no other filled the missed call log.

James stood alone in the room. The blanket lay ruffled on the bed as if whatever it covered had simply dissipated. James walked around to the other side of the bed. A crunching sound from under his shoe startled him. He bent down to take a look. Little pieces of curved, pink plastic lay on the ground, some of them shattered from his footfall. He picked up the pieces and then flung them when he realized what they were.

Fingernails.

He gagged for a moment, having to grip the dresser to keep from falling over. Then he realized as he took a deep breath what he'd not gathered at first. They were fingernails, all right, but not *real* fingernails. They were press-on nails. Although he lost some of the queasiness, James didn't feel any relief from this revelation. He gripped the blanket and, standing up, flung it from the bed. On the other side of the bed, a long, thin, dark rod with an adjacent screw at each end lay a third of the way up from the foot of the bed. The nausea came back ten fold and James vomited onto the gray, carpeted floor. He was sure the rod had been in his brother's femur before Joel's body disappeared.

Standing outside of Joel's shed in the backyard, James stood smoking a cigarette, his body convulsing, his face red and full of tears. He couldn't

understand why he kept smoking but still couldn't bring himself to put the cigarette out. He moaned in a miserable high pitch as he leaned into the front of the shed, weeping. When the cigarette ran its course and burnt his hand, James threw the butt on the ground and went into the shed. When he found Joel's gas can, it was empty. Kneeling on one knee, he chucked it aside and wiped his face. It had been worth a try, but now he would have to figure out how to get gas from a gas station if he was going to have enough fuel to get wherever he was going.

As he walked back to his car, he thought for a long moment about taking the Corsica. Joel obviously wouldn't be using it. But he knew that would only remind him of his loss. He got in his car, started it, and sped off, paying little attention to where the road took him. He drove around aimlessly for a long time, just taking inventory of his surroundings. Eventually, he came to a trashy little gas station, the only one that wasn't crowded with cars and hadn't exploded. He pulled the car into position beside one of the pumps. Without even thinking about it, he got out and swiped his card in the pump's card machine. The small screen said, "Approved" and the machine beeped at him. He pulled out the nozzle and pumped gas into the car. Once the tank was full, he replaced the nozzle back in its holder and tightened the gas cap back in place.

At some point, James wasn't really sure exactly when, he'd subconsciously decided he would head west until... well, until he found something, someone.

And if he found nothing, then he would just keep going until he couldn't go any further. When he got on the ramp for 70 West, he slammed on the gas, swerving to avoid random collided and burning cars. By the time the skyscrapers of downtown towered to his right, he was reaching 110 MPH. It didn't feel good, exactly, but it relieved him a little somehow to drive so recklessly. But as he neared the west side of town, he quickly cut his speed. The amount of cars and pileups were staggering. The highway ahead of him looked like a war-zone with dozens of smoke plumes racing each other for the highest point in the sky. As he swerved around a couple of overturned cars, something occurred to James. Compared to typical daytime weekday traffic very few cars covered the road. Then he remembered how many cars still sat in driveways just about everywhere he had been.

Every house in his housing edition had garages, but most of them probably housed automobiles. The only time so little traffic came out was in the dead of pre-dawn, before the first daily traffic rush. It must have happened all at once and likely in the middle of the night. Out of habit, he looked at the time on his cell phone. 2:30 PM. He passed the Indianapolis Airport on his right. Nothing stirred there at all. He usually saw planes either landing or taking off constantly as he drove by.

He had been worried that, once the highway slimmed down to two lanes, he would encounter more trouble with stray cars, but he found that not to be the case. As he came farther and farther from the city, he saw

less cars and accidents. The once-lush fields, now stripped of everything but dirt, appeared out of place under the clear, blue horizon. James flipped on the radio as he passed the exit for State Road 39. A high pitched squealing mixed with static shot from the speakers. He moved the dial up and down the frequency band. Various other pitches of screeching and static snipped in and out as he did this. He flipped it back off and tried to focus on the road ahead. Across the median, the occasional car sat waiting for the end of the world. Or had it already happened? He found himself getting drowsy from the monotony. His eyelids drooped heavily when out of the corner of his barely-open eyes, he saw a car zoom past on the eastbound side of the highway. He slammed on his brakes and began to swerve, the car tires screeching like a banshee as the car itself started leaning. When he regained control, James blasted over the median onto the eastbound side and sped after the car he had just seen.

James held his foot all the way down on the gas pedal. The car looked like a dot in the distance. Whoever was driving was in a hurry, that much he could tell. He felt equal parts relief and fear to know he had found someone else. The dot gradually became a slightly larger blur. He could make out its red color now. Whatever it was, it looked boxy, very European like.

As he came closer he recognized it to be an old Volkswagen van with two things tied down to the top off it that he couldn't quite make out. A moment more of holding the gas pedal down and he could see they were surf boards, one bright yellow and the other a dull purple. When he got close enough that he could read the license plate, he saw the face of the woman driving the van. She looked back at him in a panic. He had thought that anyone he might find would be just as happy as him to see another human being.

But here he had found one and she was running away.

They were in the middle lane of the now three lane highway as they passed beside the Indianapolis Airport. The lady took another look at James and then swerved to the right just in time to get on the 465 South exit before he could follow suit.

Unconcerned with traffic as there was none moving, he slammed on the brakes, squealing tires louder than he could remember. Then he slammed the car into reverse, back into drive, and spun around toward the exit. When he got onto 465 South, he slammed the pedal down and drove for some time, no moving vehicles in sight. When he got to State Road 37, he took the exit and turned back the way he came from. He drove back to where he'd entered the highway, finding no sign of the van. He pulled off to the side of the road, put the car in park, killed the engine, and sat there staring into the distance for a few minutes. He'd missed his chance, he was sure of it.

After some time sitting and feeling sorry for himself, James started the car up and drove back to I-70. He pulled onto the ramp and headed west. The sun was setting up ahead and he tried to block out the worry in the back of his mind. He couldn't stop wondering what it would be like in this desolate new world at night. The thought gave him goose bumps and he tried to bury it in his mind. He focused on the brilliant hues of gold and lavender. The farther away he got from the city, the more pitch black outside it became. But the clear skies littered with stars were a wonder

to James. He'd forgotten how magical the sight was. He had decided to spend the night driving and sleep during the day in order to quell his fears. Just the thought of closing his eyes in the dark produced images of something animated and out of focus grabbing hold of his shoulder. He shuddered. A strong wind had been pushing on the car for some time now and it was unnerving to think that all there was consisted of him, one other person, some trees here and there, strong winds, and the leftover waste of a civilization. He tried to remind himself he still didn't know for sure how far the effects of whatever had happened extended to.

Maintaining a steady 65 miles an hour, James watched the dotted lines of the highway blur past in single file. He'd been driving for three hours and by the clock on his radio it was now 9:47 PM. His headlights reflected off a familiar green sign. It was the State Road 46 exit for Terre Haute and Riley. He checked his gas gauge. Less than a quarter of a tank. He decided he would be better off getting gas somewhere he knew rather than trying somewhere completely unfamiliar to him. So, he swerved and took the exit. He almost couldn't make it due to the semi jack-knifed into the curve of the ramp, but he managed to get around by driving over the curb on the left side of the ramp. He took a right on 46 and swerved another right into the Pilot station. There were cars pulled up to most of the pumps. He found one he could pull up to without having to parallel park and killed the engine. The inside of the gas station

was well lit and just as empty as everything else. He tried his card again and this time the machine produced an error on the screen. He sighed and looked at the ominous building.

He walked up to the main front door and pulled it open. Inside the place looked as though it were any other day except there were no other people at all. Against the back wall, a single glass door hung open as if a ghost were browsing for a drink. For the first time since he woke that morning, James began to feel a deep growling in his stomach as he looked at the plastic packaged snacks covering the aisles. Even the pork rinds looked good. He went behind the counter and scrambled around until he found the plastic bags. He pulled several out and started filling the bags with a variety of unhealthy snacks. Then he went back behind the counter and tried to figure out the controls to turn on the gas for pump 6. Seemingly by accident he hit the right button and the machine beeped at him. When he came back to the car his arms were full between the bags of snacks, the two 24 packs of cola, the case of beer, and the large gas can he'd taken from the store. He put all the food and drinks in the passenger seat and started filling the gas tank. Then he filled the can. He opened the air hole on the gas can and wedged it in the trunk between a tall stack of old waterlogged magazines and a spare tire.

He closed the trunk and stood watching inside the empty gas station, his hands still sitting on the car. A gust of wind blew at him. It was strong enough that

he had to grab hold of the car to keep upright. He looked at the sky above the building. Faint stars were blurred by the bright light of the gas station. In the distant sky beyond the lights of the city he could see something dark obscuring some of the stars.

Probably just a thundercloud, he thought.

Once he was back on the highway headed west again, he looked in the rearview mirror to see the darkness spreading. He hadn't seen any lightning yet, but he was sure it would come. Several minutes later he crossed the Illinois state line. He cracked open a bag of Doritos and loudly crunched on a handful of chips. A moment of anxiety came when he realized the electricity in affected places wouldn't last much longer. He'd seen once on a documentary show that electric plants will eventually need maintenance and, without people, will shut themselves down as a safety precaution.

Two bags of chips and an apple pie later, James was nearing the I-270 junction. He still hadn't seen any lightning. A while later, he found the lines on the road starting to blur in the fuzzy warmth of the car heater. He woke up swerving toward the right edge of the highway. *Time for a wake up call*, he thought. He popped open one of the energy drinks and chugged the whole thing down in one gulp. Belching loudly, he crumpled the can and threw it over his shoulder. He couldn't help giggling afterwards. *Slaphappy time*, he thought. He turned on the radio, hoping the noise would keep him awake. Static. He hit the seek button. The first station it went to was a high-pitched

“off-the-air” tone. Next a higher-pitched static. The one after that he hadn’t been prepared for.

Strange, guttural, almost angry sounding noises filled his speakers, nearly stopping his heart. They weren’t voices. At least he didn’t think they were. But they certainly weren’t any kind of natural radio interference, either. After a while of listening, he realized he was holding his breath and had slowed down to 15 MPH. He stopped the car, put it in park, and continued listening. The sound reminded him of growling, if metal could growl. He sat listening, trying to make sense of the various deep pitches and rhythms. Then his cell phone rang.

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Robert S. Wilson is the author of *Shining in Crimson*, the first novel in his dystopian vampire series *Empire of Blood* in which his vampires aren't affected by religious relics, don't become romantically involved with humans, and neither do they sparkle. He lives with his wife, kids, dog, and a rehabilitated evil cat in Tennessee.

Check out his blog at <http://shiningincrimson.blogspot.com> where you can listen to audio episodes of *Shining in Crimson*, compete in pop quizzes, or just read his ridiculously redundant ranting.